

Aprile 21, 2016
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Statement for the Law and Justice Interim Committee

Chairman Sales and members of the committee,

My name is Joe Loos, I am a retired social worker and I volunteer as a Homeless Advocate with the Missoula Interfaith Collaborative (MIC) Homeless Advocate Network. For the last two-and-a-half years I have volunteered as both an advocate and as a supervisor of other advocates. I would like to tell you about just one of the families I worked with.

Don (not his real name) was living apart from his family when he first contacted the Missoula Interfaith Collaborative (MIC) for help with housing. He had been incarcerated in 2008 for a sexual offense. He served time, completed sexual offender treatment, and is still under supervision of probation and parole. His offense would have placed him in a tier one (lowest risk) category within the offender registry, if he had been assigned a tier, but the judge did not assign him one, which leaves most property managers and employers to assume a higher risk. Don's wife and two grade school aged children wanted him to be at home with them. Don's probation officer agreed that this would be good for him and safe for the children. However, his wife's property manager would not consider a registered sexual offender. They continued to live apart. Then, five months ago Don's wife lost her apartment because the property manager decided Don was coming to visit his family too often. She was told that if she did not leave by a certain date she would be evicted. At this point the family is still spending all of their money (his limited employment income and her limited disability income) on motels while they search for housing that will accept him. They are about to give up on living together and return to living separately. The children cannot understand why they will likely have to go back to living without their Dad.

Don and his family represent one of the most challenging examples of the difficult transition from incarceration to community because of the extra problems of discerning who is at risk for future offense and who is not, and under what circumstances. Even with a letter from his therapist stating that he is at no greater risk than the average male in Missoula, his registry status provides an almost impossible barrier. Aside from his case, in my experiences over the last two years and inquiries to agencies, I am finding that all citizens returning from incarceration have significant barriers to overcome in order to get into stable housing.

I happen to serve as a member of the board of the District XI Human Resource Council (HRC) in Missoula, an organization that for the past 50 years has devoted considerable effort and resources to bring affordable housing and housing assistance programs to Missoula, Ravalli, and Mineral Counties. Over the past two years the HRC has worked to develop the Community Housing Referral and Information System (aka: CHRIS) to coordinate services in the Missoula area and to track data. Not all

agencies have yet signed on to the shared data system, so HRC cannot yet provide a complete picture. However, according to the 2014/2015 cHris data report, of the 277 people experiencing out-of-home housing transitions that completed the data form, 18% of them previously spent time in a correctional facility in the past five years.*

In my own anecdotal experience 18% might be a low figure. Over the past two years in my advocate and supervisory roles I have either completed or received from others in our organization, 41 intakes on people seeking the assistance of an advocate to get into housing. This is but a portion – maybe one quarter – of the number of people who have come to the Homeless Advocate Network seeking help during the last two years. I recently reviewed those intakes to see how many were dealing with past incarceration for a felony as a barrier. I was actually not surprised to discover that 46%, or 19 of the 41 people I encountered seeking help through the homeless advocate network, had previously been incarcerated and were finding their prior felony conviction a significant barrier to obtaining housing.

Given the prominence of this issue among those affected by homelessness, I am compelled to strongly advocate that this committee give every serious consideration to supporting legislation in response to the report of the Montana statewide Re-entry Task Force. Their report notes that homelessness significantly increases the risk of recidivism. Please give due consideration to their several proposals. We need incentives for landlords and property managers to open up access to returning citizens. We need more financial resources than currently exist for rent assistance during the transition from incarceration to community. We need much more affordable housing in general.

* To access the Community Housing Referral and Information System (cHris) report go to:
http://www.chrisdatacenter.com/images/cHris_report_2014-2015_.pdf